

ABC NIGHTLINE
19 December 1984

GIBSON: Good evening. I'm Charles Gibson, and this is Nightline.

CASPAR WEINBERGER (secretary of Defense): I think it is something that should not be discussed in the public, ah, ah; prints. There are certain things that we have to do, that we should do, that when they're published can only give aid and comfort to the enemy.

GIBSON: It's a story Defense Secretary Weinberger didn't want out. It concerns a spy satellite to be carried aloft by the space shuttle next month. Did the news media jeopardize national security? Did the Russians learn something they didn't already know?

ANNOUNCER: This is ABC News Nightline. Substituting for Ted Koppel and reporting from Washington, Charles Gibson.

GIBSON: It is a conflict of values that has arisen often in this country, the government's need to protect the national security in conflict with the need for a free flow of information in a free society. This morning, the Washington Post published details of a military mission of the space shuttle to be launched next month. The shuttle will place a satellite in stationary orbit over the Soviet Union to intercept radio, telephone and satellite transmissions. Other news organizations had the story but withheld it at the request of the Pentagon. The Post got no such requests, and the Post published. As Nightline correspondent Jed Duvall reports, it has opened a whole new debate about that conflict of values.

BRIG. GEN. RICHARD ABEL (Air Force spokesman): We are working to deny our adversaries any information which might reveal the identity of mission of DOD payload.

DUVALL: The general told the reporters and through them their producers and editors not to tell, not to describe the secret cargo to be carried on the space shuttle early next year. ABEL: Any release of DOD payload information would have no value to anyone except the Soviets or other potential adversaries. Publication or broadcast of such information, speculative or not, would harm our national security.

DUVALL: How does one not tell a good story? By talking about it. DAN RATHER (CBS Evening News): David Martin reports on preparations for space shuttle missions to put military payloads into orbit. DAVID MARTIN: The space shuttle... The Pentagon is counting on it to carry a new generation of intelligence satellite into orbit.

RICK INDERFURTH (ABC World News Tonight): In fact, almost everything about the Air Force's shuttle missions will be top secret.

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DUVALL: Reporters all over Washington knew what the cargo is, knew before the general's warning, reporters at magazines, newspapers and networks. There was even a story about NBC and others who knew the secret but held back, honoring the Pentagon's request. LAWRENCE GROSSMAN (president, NBC News): In my

discussion with the secretary of Defense, we talked about the fact that the story was known to NBC, that on the basis of what we had, it was clear that others would soon get it and that we certainly don't like to be beaten at a story that we're ahead on but that if it was a matter of urgent national security that we would respect that.

DUVALL: Then today, the Washington Post broke the story. The page-one account reveals what sort of satellite the shuttle will carry and what its military mission will be. It's just the story Defense Secretary Weinberger did not want to see or hear in public. WEINBERGER: I can confirm only that it's the height of journalistic irresponsibility to, ah, ah, violate requests that are made. This was, these requests were made and responsibly honored by many networks, ABC, NBC, CBS, Associated Press. The Washington Post felt that they simply had to run a story which a great many people had. They ran it with the typical usual inaccuracies.

DUVALL: Washington Post Executive Editor Ben Bradley issued a statement claiming that in public congressional testimony, 'The Pentagon itself has gone into far greater detail about surveillance satellites than we did in our story.'

Whatever the Post did, it was enough to open the gates for everybody else.

PETER JENNINGS (ABC World News Tonight): Good evening. It is not easy in this day and age in an open society to keep a secret.

DAN RATHER (CBS Evening News): President Reagan called today's press accounts 'harmful to national security.' Defense Secretary Weinberger called it 'irresponsible.' News organizations called it 'informing a free people.'

TOM BROKAW (NBC Nightly News): At NBC News, we withheld an earlier story on the launch and the satellite at the direct request of Defense Secretary Weinberger. But tonight, Fred Frances describes what has been reported about this mission so far. FRED FRANCES: In addition to collecting all Soviet space flight and missile data, the new satellite will be able to listen in on Soviet radio and telephone transmissions.

DAVID MARTIN (CBS Evening News): A new generation of spy satellite designed to eavesdrop on Soviet communications, everything from telephone conversations to radio signals from Soviet missile tests.

DUVALL: How does government keep a secret once reporters hear it? President John F. Kennedy persuaded the New York Times to delay reporting about the impending attack on Cuba and later said he wished he had not done so, thinking perhaps a few lives might have been saved. When, in 1971, United States troops assisted South Vietnamese forces invading Laos, reporters who were there and editors back home respected a military embargo. News gathering went ahead, but for nine days airing and printing were postponed. It worked. A few news people

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knew four years ago that several Americans were hiding in the Canadian Embassy in Tehran. They were asked to keep the secret and did. Yes, government can get news agencies to cooperate. On the shuttle story, Aviation Week magazine, on its own, has been holding back for weeks. WILLIAM GREGORY (editor, Aviation Week): It was something we accepted in, in confidence, and obviously we wanted to keep our word and keep it in confidence. So when this whole thing became a big issue of to print or not to print a couple of weeks ago, it was, as far as we, we were concerned a moot issue, because we'd already made our promise, and we weren't about to break our word.

DUVALL: Major television networks did too. GROSSMAN: We are broadcasters, but we're also American broadcasters, and we're concerned about the security and responsible about this country.

DUVALL: But these days, the news agencies don't always cooperate. In 1971, just months after that success in the Laos invasion, the major government press fight of our time began over the Pentagon Papers published by the New York Times and other papers. Editors did not buy the government claim of national security. GEORGE WATSON (ABC News vice president): Many times in the past, national security is invoked whenever the government wants to suppress information that is, for example, merely embarrassing or that clearly has no relevance to genuine concerns of endangering national security.

DUVALL: Central to the Washington Post argument about today's shuttle cargo story is the claim that it printed nothing that hasn't been out already on the records somewhere. In other words, how can government ask news agencies to hide something government itself has already disclosed? It can be as embarrassing as the case of Project White Cloud, a super-secret satellite program first noticed in great detail on souvenir envelopes for sale in the gift shop at NASA's Houston Space Center for a dollar each. UNIDENTIFIED VOICE (footage of U.S. servicemen, Paramount Pictures, 1940s): Remember the Rangers as you saw them after their baptism of fire at the end.

DUVALL: There was another time, of course, when the reporters and their bosses did not break such stories, when the military had no trouble with press people. World War II and Korea were reported with military censorship and self-censorship in place. Some yearn for the ease, the neatness, the orderliness of a time long gone. Jed Duvall for Nightline from Washington.

GIBSON: And when we come back, we'll look at the issue of national security versus press freedom, as we talk live with a veteran CIA official, George Carver, and with Walter Mears, the executive editor of the Associated Press.

GIBSON: Joining us live now here in our Washington bureau is George Carver, now a senior fellow at Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies, a veteran of 26 years in intelligence and a former special assistant to

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three directors of the CIA. And in our New York studios, Walter Mears, the executive editor of the Associated Press, which had the spy satellite story but held it back at the request of the Pentagon until it was published by the Washington Post.

GIBSON: Walter, you had the story. Why'd you hold it? WALTER MEARS (Associated Press): We were told back on Dec. 3rd that the publication of the story would do direct and serious damage to the national security. We were in a situation in which we had to weigh that against our basic mission, which is not to withhold stories but to tell them. In this case, we decided that it was appropriate and responsible to withhold the story, and we did so.

GIBSON: Walter, who called, and what specific points did he make when he called? MEARS: The call came from Deputy Sec, Deputy Secretary *Taft, to our executive vice president, Lou *Bacardi. And it was prompted by the fact that as

part of the reporting process we went to the Pentagon seeking further information and comment on what we had learned about the story that now has been published.

GIBSON: Well, talk me through a little bit what happened in your intercouncils. What did you, what did you feel about it when it happened? How did you react to it? Was there serious question about whether you'd honor the Pentagon's request? MEARS: It was a good deal of soul-searching. As I say, our basic mission is not to withhold stories. What we do for a living is, ah, is get stories and tell stories. And here we were in a situation in which we're told that this one will do serious damage to the national security. You get conflicting imperatives there for, for somebody in the news business. And we came down on the side of withholding that story.

GIBSON: And what was the determining factor? MEARS: The determining factor was that, that the deputy secretary of Defense maintained that, that this would in fact do damage to the national security.

GIBSON: Well, yes, but was... MEARS: And that, you know, we're not in the business of judging the national security. That's not a, a call that we can make.

GIBSON: No, but the danger always exists that they will cry wolf when there is no danger, and there has to be some piece of evidence I would suspect that they cited that, that tipped the scales that way, in your mind. MEARS: And the, the evidence was basically what they're arguing publicly now, that it's a tip-off to the Soviet Union or something that, ah, that was supposed to be a secret. One of the problems here is that I think we do our job better than they do their job. It's their job to keep secrets and ours to learn what we can. They certainly didn't maintain this one very well.

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GIBSON: George Carver, you have 26 years background in intelligence. Do you think the Post did wrong? GEORGE CARVER (former CIA official): I think the Post did very wrong. I consider its action unconscionable (sic), irresponsible, unpatriotic and childish. It was like a group of school boys who get pictures of girls showering in the locker room and spread 'em around the playground in a show-off attempt to prove how tough and macho they are.

GIBSON: Well, but what's the harm? The Post made the point today in its response to Caspar Weinberger that there was nothing in its story that wasn't in previous congressional testimony, that hadn't come out in technical journals, et

cetera. And no one was hurt or is hurt by this kind of story. CARVER: Well, that's just simply not true. Back in 1945, a fellow named Henry *Smyth published an account of how the Manhattan Project was done. He objected violently that everything was in the public domain. And 10 years later, the Russians said that they had worked constantly with his book at their side and that he had saved them months, if not years, in developing their own atomic bomb. You, Ben Bradley was not elected by anyone and is not qualified to judge what damage could be done down the road in publicizing our most sensitive intelligence collection facilities.

GIBSON: What detail is in the Post story that you think harms national security? CARVER: Well, I think... I don't want to speculate on national television, what detail. I would only compound the damage. But it pinpointed certain allegations about the nature of it, where it was going to be positioned, what it was going to do, and it directed attention to it. And I think that Mr. Mears, though he and I may disagree on some philosophy, I think the Associated Prof, Press, NBC, Aviation Week particularly, behaved far more responsibly than did the Washington Post, in somewhat typical fashion.

GIBSON: But isn't it the responsibility of the government, if it wants to keep these stories secret, to police its own house? Is it not somewhat closing the barn door, in effect, after the horse is gone, to blame the press? The leaks come. They come from inside government. That's where the fault lies, is it not? CARVER: Well, you're absolutely right. The Post's sources are the ones who should be fried in oil first. After that, I think the Post should seriously

look at whether their professional egos and reputation are more important than the security and safety of the United States. I don't happen to think that they

are. MEARS: Could I suggest to you that perhaps some of the macho childishness

that was demonstrated at the Pentagon over the past several days with this very public briefing and almost a dare, ah, ah, 'Publish this and we'll investigate,'

that was not a part of the mix at the time that we were contacted by the Pentagone early this month. It seems to me that all that served to do was call attention to the whole episode and, and further determine the outcome of it.

CARVER: No, Wally, you're absolutely correct. There's plenty of blame to go around all over the place, and it's certainly not located only on 15th Street, where the Washington Post headquarters are. But I think that the failure to recognize that there were genuine national security interests involved and the sort of adversarial, competitive imperative that came into play seriously outweighed the national interest, even if the Pentagon had made mistakes of its own, which in this case it probably did.

GIBSON: All right, gentlemen, we're gonna take a break for a moment, and when we come back, we'll be joined by author James Bamford, whose writings on intelligence and national security matters have been attacked by the Pentagon and the National Security Agency.

GIBSON: Joining us now in our Boston bureau is James Bamford, who wrote a book on the super-secret National Security Agency, and he has doubts about whether any serious national security information was compromised by the Washington Post

article. Mr. Bamford, Mr. Carver says indeed, things could have come out in that article that would have been harmful to the national security. You don't think so. JAMES BAMFORD (intelligence expert): No, not at all. The things that came out in that article were things that anybody who's read the trade press and knows a little bit about satellites would assume. It's going to be a, a spy satellite. They've been waiting a long time to launch a spy satellite in the shuttle. It's not gonna be a photo satellite because it's going up into geostationary orbit, which is 22,000 miles high. The photo system you'd put at a very lower, much lower altitude, about 100 miles.

GIBSON: When you say that somebody who'd read the technical journals would assume but don't know, and you say the geosynchronous orbit. That's a stationary orbit over the Soviet Union. Maybe, maybe people don't know that. Those details, when they come out in the press, can they not be harmful?

BAMFORD: Well, people don't know that, but the people who don't know that are not the people that are interested in it. The Soviet Union obviously knows that. One problem that I think Mr. Carver doesn't really seem to address is the

fact that most of what the Soviet Union knows about our satellites has not come from the press. Only a small, minute part has. It's come from very atrocious security on the part of the CIA and the satellite intelligence community.

GIBSON: But Mr. Bamford, if a small, minute part does come from the press, isn't that too much. In effect, who... I mean, Mr. Carver asked the question. Who are the editors of the Washington Post to decide what national security issues get in print and not? When Caspar Weinberger walks in and says, 'Please don't print this,' doesn't that, in effect, decide the issue? BAMFORD: Well, I

don't think it really should, not in this system. In the Soviet Union it definitely does. The government definitely decides what goes into the press, and

what doesn't. This is a different system here. We wouldn't have had Watergate come out if, if we had the administration dictate what's going into the press and what isn't. CARVER: It's not a question of dictating. The administration was elected by the people of the United States to protect and defend this country. They have the responsibility. And their judgment, Jim, much as I liked your book, I would take in preference to yours. BAMFORD: Well, I, with all due respect to you, Mr. Carver, the, ah... When I did my book, 'The Puzzle Palace,' on the National Security Agency, I voluntarily withheld a number of details that came to me, not out of any request by the federal administration, but because I just didn't think they would serve any purpose in the book, and I thought they might give away too much information. But I think a responsible press can decide that. I think the Washington Post didn't print everything that

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it could have, and what it did print, I think, is, ah, ah, gives very little if any information. I don't think it gives any information to the Soviet Union. CARVER: Well, I...

GIBSON: Yeah, Mr. Carver, two points here. The Washington Post in its statement today did say that, 'We kept out of our story information we knew that the Pentagon considered sensitive.' And the other point that is made, that the Soviet intelligence is... CARVER: That's like saying, that's like saying, 'I only blugeoned my grandmother. I didn't drown her.' BAMFORD: Well, one problem is the, the, the space program is becoming a very major national issue, which really should be debated, what we're putting up in space, weapons. And if there is a blanket policy by the administration that nobody write anything about any military systems that go into space, I just think that we're gonna lose out on a very important debate. MEARS: It seems to me that this is getting blown a bit out of proportion, though, when you talk about a blanket policy that's gonna keep this out of the press. I mean, you have one situation here. It lasted two weeks, and it's in print. The administration, no administration is gonna be able to go back to the AP, the NBC, to news organizations over and over again and say, 'Don't print this. Don't print that.' That just isn't gonna fly. CARVER: Well, you're right, and there is a balance issue, and you know, our government functions on a system of checks and balances, and we've forgotten about the balance. Harry Truman, with salty directness, put his finger on it in 1951 when he said, 'Whether it be treason or not, it does as much harm to the interest of the United States for its military secrets to be given to a potential enemy by open publication as for them to be given by the clandestine operation of spies.' And I just simply think that needless speculation and printing stories of highly sensitive information serves no purpose, serves, does not serve the national interest, and is very hard to defend on any grounds that I can accept or that I would suspect that most of the viewers of this program would be prepared to accept.

GIBSON: Mr. Carver, let me stop you on that point. Caspar Weinberger today said, 'When something like this is published,' and I'm quoting him, 'it can only give aid and comfort to the enemy.' Now that's pretty stern stuff and that suggests other words. And yet, in the next breath, he said there would be no investigation into this case. That sounds to me like he's not as concerned as he sounded earlier. CARVER: No, I think Secretary Weinberger is extremely concerned, but I think he is also well aware of the difficulties of trying to mount an investigation. The investigation would have to be internal, looking for their sources. You can't look externally into the press without getting into serious First Amendment problems. But I think that you've got a combination of genuine, genuine concern and serious frustration about the inability to give meaning to that concern by doing something practical about it. MEARS: We reported today that the Pentagon has asked the Justice Department for a preliminary investigation of the original leaks that led to the stories early this month that did not appear. BAMFORD: I just think that if the CIA put a

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fraction of as much effort (sic) and the administration put a fraction as much effort into actually trying to prevent the secrets from getting out of the intelligence agencies as they are to trying to prevent the press from covering the story, they might be in a lot better position. The most secret photo satellite we have is the KH-11. A former CIA employee, William ~~*Piles~~ ^{*SAMPLES}, sold the operations manual to that satellite to the Soviet Union, and sold it to 'em for \$3,000. There's nothing left to the imagination about that satellite, and it's not because of the press. It was because of poor security. The same with a sigint satellite known as *Rialight, which was given away by *Chris Boyce, who worked for TRW. These are where the real breaches of security come from.

GIBSON: I would be remiss if I didn't throw out the question do any of you have

any feelings about the possibility... You've all said that it would be better if we stop these leaks at the source, that if the administration worried more about people inside its own house that were leaking as opposed to the press. How would you feel about an official secrets act such as exists in Britain, where people can be prosecuted for leaking information? CARVER: Well, provided

one were very carefully drafted, I think that some form of official secrets act could be useful. It's a very complicated question. There are contrary, conflicting imperatives in an open and democratic society, but as Justice Goldberg observed in a ruling in 1963, 'The Constitution is not a suicide pact.'

And I think in an age of thermonuclear missiles and intercontinental rocketry, we have to recognize that we're gonna have to temper some of our openness if we want to protect our survival.

GIBSON: Walter Mears? MEARS: I think that it would be dangerous. I think that, I think that there is ample authority at this point for the government to deal with the people who work for the government. The problem is, as I say, that the, the government's not doing its job when it, when it cannot keep such a secret as this any better than this one's kept. I just, ah...

GIBSON: Walter, you raised a question earlier, that the government almost waved

a red flag when it held news conferences and said that it would treat speculation stories about this satellite very harshly. Maybe I'm too cynical. Are there other motives do you think that the government may have for raising this issue? MEARS: I frankly do not know. That was one of the things, as I say... We went through some soul searching. That's one of the things that concerned us. We don't know.

GIBSON: We're gonna have many, we're gonna have many more military missions on the, on the space shuttle. I wonder if they're simply laying the groundwork for, for keeping those secret down the road. MEARS: Only time can tell the answer to that question. Of course, there are many, many more secrets than military space shuttles, but it seems to me that when you hold a public briefing and sort of boast about how you're gonna have a secret countdown, you are waving a red flag.

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GIBSON: I, I... Let me stop you for a minute. I should warn our affiliates up and down the line that we're gonna run a little over tonight. We're gonna go a little long with this discussion, but it won't be, it won't be too long. Let me go to Jim Bamford for a minute. Do you think there might be other motives, Jim, that the government has here? BAMFORD: I think it's just a continuation of the Reagan administration's heavy emphasis on secrecy. I don't think there's anything unusual or wrong about trying to keep a spy satellite mission secret. We've been launching these satellites for 25 years now, since 1960, and they've always been on expendable rockets from a fairly remote base, Vandenburg Air Force Base, and there hasn't been much attention. But now we're involving human beings, and we're involving the space shuttle, so obviously, there's gonna be a lot more attention, and I think the administration would just as soon try to keep things the way they have been before we used the shuttle.

GIBSON: Walter, Jed Duvall made reference in his piece to the fact that there was a time that the press treated the government more gently, I guess, that there was cooperation. It was a far more common occurrence, that the press and the government were, in effect, in league. What changed? What is... Is there a bad attitude now? And do you think the public turns against the press on these issues? MEARS: I don't think there's a bad attitude. I think, I think there's a good deal more skepticism. A lot of people attribute that to Watergate. I think it really grew out of the Vietnam War era, when national security was raised as a reason not to do all sorts of things. There was some mention of John Kennedy's famous remark of 1962 about he wished that the Times had gone with the Bay of Pigs story, and it would have saved him a mistake. We tend to think that John Kennedy was the president who tried to get a reporter fired for reporting that things were going poorly in Vietnam in the early 1960s.

CARVER: Well, Walter's got a good point, but there's a flip side to that also. One of the difficulties that has grown up in the last few years is many elements of the print and electronic media, the press, so to speak, have taken a very adversarial role towards the government, held themselves the judges of everyone else but accountable to no one but themselves. And this is something that I think the American people quite properly resent and makes them quite properly restless.

GIBSON: All right. George Carver, thank you very much. All three of you, thank you, and we'll leave that as the last word. And I'll be back in a moment.